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ABSTRACT

In order to look at the issues involved in decentralizing urban school districts, we must consider a number of things. Among these are the method of selecting the members of the local shcool boards; the amount of power of the community boards; control of financing and budget; curriculum; and the hiring, firing, and rewarding of teachers. In many ways the fight over decentralization is a good way of looking at the whole question of the adequacy of the educational system in the urban community because decentralization is an attempt to deal with the systems that have led the local residents to demand improved education. The main obstacles to decentralization of schools in New York City are an entrenched bureaucracy in the New York City school system, a very large and powerful Teachers' Union, and the political ramifications which accompany the process of decentralization. The main benefits are lessening of the administrative lethargy of the centralized bureaucracy and ease of responsiveness in meeting the needs of local communities. Local board members have gain expertise and skill in dealing with the political realities of urban education through the on-the-job training process that they have gone through. It will take time, effort, and some changes in power relationships for decentralization to be an effective mechanism for improving the quality of urban education. (Author/JM)

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DECENTRALIZATION OF NEW YORK CITY SCHOOLS - - -

Some Important Issues*

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Some Important Issues

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In recent years fewer topics or issues have caused as much fervor and unrest as the issue of decentralization of public schools. It is odd that this issue should cause so much concern because the public schools throughout the country have been typically operated at the local level; that is, they have been decentralized. The issue of decentralization of public schools is an issue that relates mainly to the large urban metropoli in the United States. The reason for this is that urban school districts have typically been centralized. Schools have been operated as a central unit in cities with large populations while the smaller governmental units outside the cities have operated their schools as decentralized units with pupil populations of three to ten thousand. Many large-city school districts have pupil populations upwards of twenty, thirty or fifty thousand, and in the case of New York City, one million pupils.

As the residents of the urban communities, particularly cities inhabited primarily by Blacks, Puerto Ricans, Chicanos and low-income families, have become dissatisfied with the accomplishments of the public schools, there has been a cry for the return of the control of the schools to the people who live in the community which the particular schools serve. The greatest press for decentralization has come from the predominately Black communities where, as the concern for Black pride and the drive for Black control or Black nationhood have increased, there have been concomitant demands to turn the schools in these communities over to the "local residents."

Although some of the leaders in some of the decentralized controversies have not actually been residents of the particular community where the demands for decentralization were being made, they have seen the schools as one of the key areas for developing political influence in the inner city. In a sense, this is not unlike what happened in many suburban school districts during the late 50's and early 60's, where suburban residents in their frustration over county-wide and state-wide taxes turned their fire on local schools districts. In the case of decentralization in urban communities,

groups of people who have not had access to political power and are discriminated against, have seen the school, in terms of both locus of control and social urgency, as their main target. In order to look at the issues involved in decentralization of urban school districts, we must consider a number of things. Among these are the method of selecting the members of the local school boards, the amount of power of the community boards, control of financing and budget, curriculum and an issue which has caused a great deal of concern, namely: the hiring, firing and rewarding of teachers. Each of these areas has its own intrinsic problems when looked at in the context of education in general, but when decentralization is involved, the conflict around these issues become much sharper. In many ways the fight over decentralization is a good way of looking at the whole question of the adequacy of the educational system in the urban community because decentralization is an attempt to deal with the symptoms that have led the local residents to demand improved education.

Let us look at some of the obstacles to effective decentralization.[1] Probably the most significant obstacle to effective

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[1]These observations are based in part on the following studies:

Brown, Jr., Roscoe C., "Evaluation of District Decentralized Title I ESEA Programs," Center for Urban Education, December 1968.

_____, "Decentralized Title I Projects,

decentralization of the New York City schools (although it is difficult to say that one obstacle is more significant than another) - let us say the most talked-about obstacle - is the massive bureaucracy of New York City's school system. While a bureaucracy is necessary in a system with a teaching and professional staff of over sixty thousand and a pupil population that numbers over one million, New York City's bureaucracy has had a stifling effect on the schools. The bureaucratic system leads to one bureaucrat looking over his shoulder at another bureaucrat who is above him, and so on. You have a kind of domino effect in that a bureaucrat refuses to do something or does something "according to the books" because he is fearful that the bureaucrat who is over him will be unduly critical of him to still another bureaucrat. Another negative aspect of the bureaucracy is the fact that it leads people to cluster around vested interests. These vested interests can have severe effects on the schools in that the incumbents of various positions frequently stay long enough to develop an influence that extends beyond his particular position. If decentralization is to be effective, the rigid stranglehold, which bureaucratic structures and procedures have had on the

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1968-69," Center for Urban Education, 1969.

_____, "Evaluation of Community Education Centers of New York City," Center for School Services, New York University, 1969.

school system, must be broken. This will require some legislative action because some of the present structures are required by law.

The recently resigned Chancellor Scribner took some steps to break some of the strangleholds, but every time he attempted to do so, he was severely criticized by his own employees for not "knowing the realities of New York City" or "moving to make change too fast." It is a painful professional joke that every time there is a problem in New York City public schools, the Board of Education, or some unit of city government commissions a study (often for hundreds of thousands of dollars) to look at the schools and to make recommendations for changes.

Co-existing with the New York City school bureaucracy is another force which exerts considerable influence on the schools; this force, the Teachers' Union, represents the second obstacle to decentralization. Advancing from a position approximately ten years ago, when the teachers were not particularly well-respected by the bureaucratic hierarchy of the Board of Education, the Teachers' Union has now gained tremendous support and influence. The power of the Teachers' Union grew out of the strikes which were carried out first for recognition, and wage and job improvements, and then, the

Ocean-Hill Brownsville strike for teacher rights (namely, teacher rights to a fair hearing before being discharged). Depending upon how one interprets the facts, it has been suggested by some observers of the New York City scene that the Teachers' Union has provoked controversy with various community groups to reinforce their position of strength within the city school system. Differences of opinion about this point notwithstanding, the fact is that the recent strikes have been a significant factor in polarizing the teachers and the community. Generally, minority-group parents have tended to support the actions of the local boards in attempting to fire the "incompetent" teachers swiftly and have kept alive the controversy between the community and the teachers. As a result of the community's dissatisfaction with teacher performance, several alternatives for selecting and appointing teachers have been suggested (e.g. Use of State Certification as the sole requirement). Quite naturally, these alternatives have not been met with favor from organized teacher and administrative groups.

In a union-oriented city with an elected city government that is generally favorably disposed towards labor, it is probably unrealistic to expect decentralized community school boards to make a significant impact on the various contractual

provisions that the union has been able to win for the teachers. The organized teaching profession has a very personal interest in seeing that decentralization with significant and meaningful power at the community level does not work, and will use its power to that end. While documents of the union and statements of the leaders of the union support decentralization, these statements are usually hedged with so many "ifs" that, realistically, they do not lend support to decentralization.

A third obstacle to the development of an effective program of decentralization in New York City is the use of decentralization for political ends. I have previously mentioned some of these political factors in regard to the union and the city government, but here, I am referring to the fact that the decentralized schools probably represent the first taste of local political or social control for the residents of many inner-city neighborhoods. The local community school boards have had to make some decisions involving expenditures and personnels which have caused considerable political conflict. Thus, the schools have become a battleground for the development of political acumen and a testing ground for various political insights. While this is to be expected, abuse of this power has caused havoc

in some communities, without attendant improvement of the schools. Ways must be found to deal with these conflicts and still preserve the essence of the community control if decentralization is to be successful.

Now to look at some of the possible benefits of decentralization if the obstacles mentioned above can be overcome, or at least their effects ameliorated in some way. Probably the most significant benefit from having an effective program of decentralized control of local schools is simplification of the process for making changes in the educational enterprise of that community. If local community boards can overcome the hostility and the delaying tactics of the large central bureaucracy and the opposition of the Teachers' Union, it should be possible for them to move more quickly to improve education in the local communities. Even though decentralization should simplify the making of changes, changes will not come about just because of decentralization. One of the previously mentioned obstacles to effective decentralization, namely politics, might even slow down changes in the early years of decentalization since there are so many vested interest groups competing for a position in the sun. In a sense, this is what politics is all about. So long as the tax dollar is used to support public

education, there will be political ramifications and the necessity to respond to various pressure groups. Despite concern about the political nature of some of the decentralization districts, it is my belief that operation of a centralized bureaucracy involves even more politics. The political machinations in a centralized bureaucracy are done covertly and do not often reach the public's eyes. When similar happenings occur in the decentralized school districts, they usually become headlines with the attendant denigration of decentralization.

Some observers of decentralization have asked, "Why do you want to substitute one devil for another?" (Substitute decentralized politics for centralized politics.) This is an oversimplification of the problem because it does not recognize the fact that there are some growing pains in any change of power relationships. Decentralized boards of education have the capacity to respond more immediately to the concerns of local community residents than the centralized alternative because of their proximity to local concerns. In order to do this, they will have to overcome the conflict caused by political ferment in the community. (Conflict can be used creatively.)

Another benefit of decentralization is one which is a

direct outcome of having a smaller administrative unit responsible for curriculum, hiring of teachers, hiring of principals. That is, it is possible to have more flexibility in operating the schools. When the decentralized structure is implemented without a large number of central Board of Education restrictions, it should be possible to develop a much more flexible educational system which involves pupils, parents, teachers and community residents in educational planning. This is what the whole decentralization issue is about - the involvement of the community in their schools. Ideally, decentralization should make the local schools more responsible for providing a high quality of education or, in contemporary educational language, "more accountable."

Summary

As I close this paper, it might be beneficial to review again some of the factors that are involved in decentralization of schools in New York City. The main obstacle to decentralization are an entrenched bureaucracy in the New York City school system, a very large and powerful Teachers' Union and the political ramifications which accompany the process of decentralization. The main benefits are lessing the administrative lethargy of the centralized bureaucracy, and ease of responsiveness in

meeting the needs of local communities. At a recent hearing of the City Charter Revision Commission Isaiah Robinson, a Black member of the Central Board of Education evaluated the decentralization issue thusly, "It's (decentralization's) first year was taken up with administrative problems, its second with the clash of authority between the central and local boards and its third with the issue of local control of finances.....despite complaints that they do not have enough say over such matters as allocation of funds, capital construction, and the hiring of teachers, the Boards will resolve the problems in time and civic participation will increase."[2] Certainly, local board members have gained expertise and skill in dealing with the political realities of urban education through the on-the-job training" process that they have gone through. Joseph Monserrat, a Puerto Rican, who was President of the New York City Board of Education, said at the same hearing, "It would be a mistake to think in 'black and white' terms of centralization versus decentralization. The best approach would be a merger, with the lines of authority clearly defined."[3]

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[2]"Decentralization Gets Evaluation." The New York Times, February 10, 1973, p. 35.

[3]Ibid.

These statements by two minority members of the Central Board of Education summarize the issue succintly..... It will take time, effort and some changes in power relationships for decentralization to be an effective mechanism for improving the quality of urban education. I believe that the issues involved in decentralized control of urban education are important enough for those of us who are concerned with urban education to consider them seriously and not reject decentralization as another "fad" or radical idea that will not work.